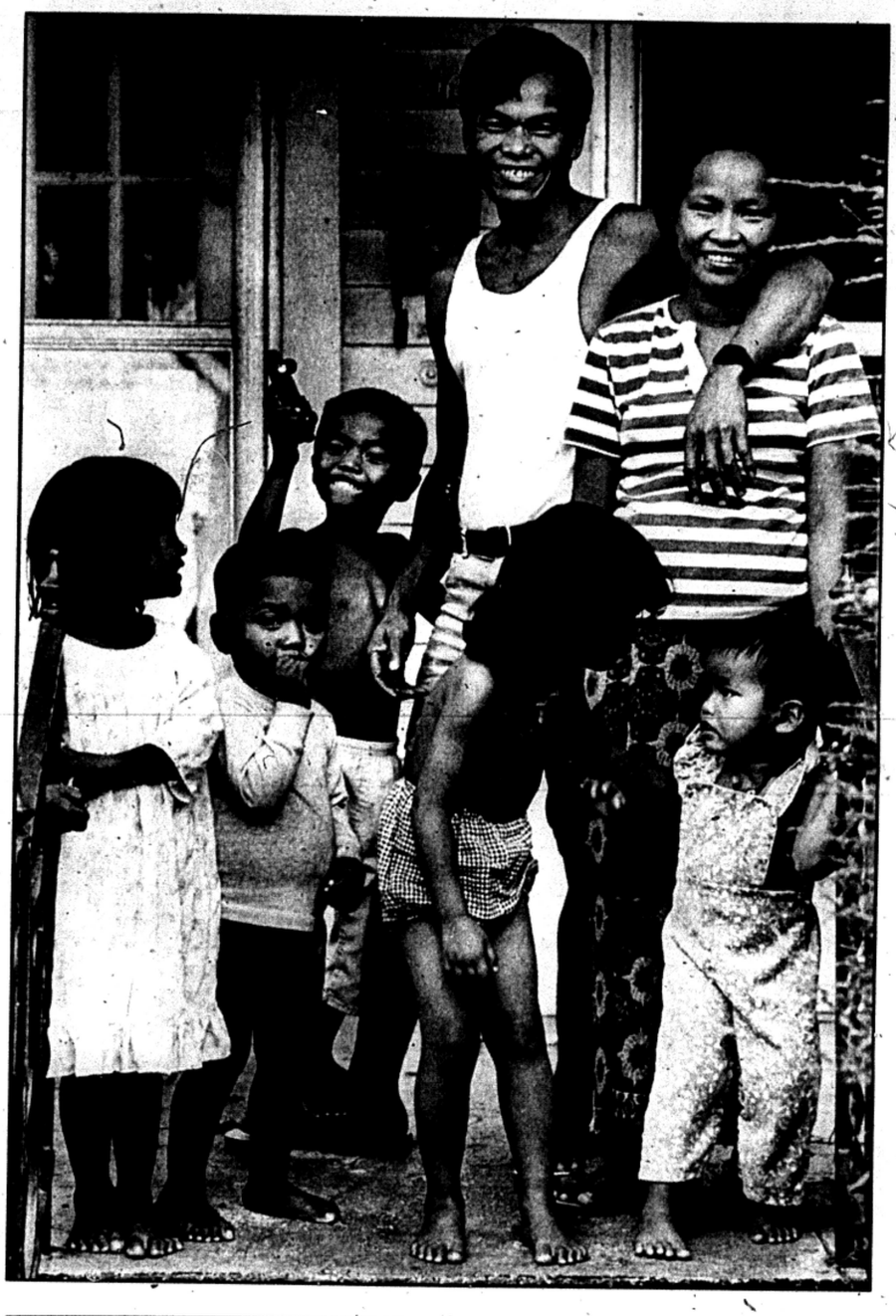
4-24-1986

UA12/2/1 College Heights Herald - Magazine

WKU Student Affairs

HERALD
Magazine
April 24, 1986



ការសិក្សា ក្នុងការ TO ADJUST

The nearly 390 Southeast Asian refugees create a community within a community in Bowling Green. The town and the immigrants struggle to connect.

Story by Mary Meehan
Photos by Cathy Rose

Among the nearly 390 refugees living in Bowling Green, tales are told of starvation and mass graves, memories of family left behind or murdered. These stories of death and near-death are told in the matter-of-fact cadence that comes with seeing the worst and living through it.

When the Khmer Rouge invaded Cambodia in the mid-70s, the systematic elimination of an entire class of people began. All those with any signs of education, including reading glasses, were exterminated. Textbooks were burned. Schools were closed and thousands of people were moved to the countryside.

Seath Bun, who has lived in the Bowling Green area for several years, survived.

"I am a quiet man," said Bun, who was a student hoping to become a pharmacist when the communists took over. "People didn't realize I go to school. I didn't tell anything."

His face hardens. His small hands knot into tight fists.

"When they come it was kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill."

The 79 families from Cambodia, the 13 from Vietnam and the 15 from Laos are all survivors. They have escaped the pestilence and per-

see page 6

Also

From Garbo to the gospel, the State Theater has been reborn as Fountain Square Free Methodist Church.

And

What can one student do to stop the nuclear arms race?
Keep trying.

HERALD
Magazine

COVER:

The nearly 390 refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam struggle to adjust to a new life in Bowling Green.

THREE:

The nuclear arms race won't end tomorrow, but a small group of students is doing their part to make a difference.

FOUR:

When the State Theater got religion the Fountain Square Free Methodist Church got a home.

STAFF:

CRAIG DEZERN, EDITOR
GARY CLARK, PHOTO EDITOR

STATE THEATER GETS RELIGION

The theater doesn't look unusual. Just another old movie-house with a past. It had seen everything from vaudeville shows to modern family films to X-rated movies — a final shot at keeping the projectors rolling.

But nothing worked. The doors finally closed in February 1982 and the building stood silent for three years.

Then State Theater got religion.

■

In the front, rows of red-cushioned theater seats have been replaced by a small, raised stage. A podium stands on the front of the stage behind a table bearing a Bible and a cross. A piano and organ rest in opposite corners.

The huge movie screen hangs familiarly in place, but song lyrics, not movies, flash across it now. Contemporary Christian music and traditional hymns waver in and out of focus as the congregation sings.

■

The Fountain Square Free Methodist Church premiered in February 1985. "We then had a service cleansing the theater and consecrating it to God," said Dr. Bill Lane, a professor of religion.

The congregation changed its name, formerly First Free Methodist Church, to "Fountain Square Free Methodist" to make the community feel that the church is a part of Bowling Green.

That a thriving congregation can worship and grow in a movie house proves a point, said Dr. Larry Caillouet, an associate professor of communication and theater.

"You can worship anywhere," he said. "It's the service that makes a church, not the auditorium."

■

Red signs glow on either side of the screen, marking exits rarely used. Solid green, pink and white banners jut from the walls adjacent to the screen.

In the back, about 15 rows of seats have been roped off so people will sit nearer the front of the room.

■

"I think if Jesus were here he'd like it," said Cindy Thomas, Women's Director for Campus Crusade for Christ. "I look at this church as, 'Wow! I'd hate to miss it.'

"I think it's going to be one of the fastest growing churches in Bowling Green someday."

Caillouet said the church has members from "many denominational backgrounds — Methodist, Mennonite, Quaker, Baptist. I think this melding of perspectives gives the church strength."

The congregation moved to the theater because it had outgrown its old building on 14th and Indianola streets. Regular attendance had grown from 50 or 60 to about 140.

The church rented the Cutliff Building on old Louisville Road, for a year and a half while looking for a new building, preferably a cheaper one. That quest brought pastor Doug Newton to the State Theater.

"Just as a lark I asked how much it would cost to buy it," Newton said. When they found out, the congregation decided to make the purchase.

The church paid $40,000 plus the cost of renovations for the theater, which left the congregation about $180,000 in debt, Newton said.

■

The dusty exterior of the building looks unchanged except for the words Fountain Square Free Methodist Church in bright red letters on the marquee.

The booth to the right of the lobby doors is used occasionally by Christian groups to sell tickets for events such as benefit concerts.

Once, that booth sold tickets through two windows. White patrons bought their tickets closest to the lobby. Blacks got theirs next to the street, then walked up separate stairway entrances to the upper balcony.

The State Theater was designed for segregation.

■

Before the theater became a church, a gate divided the upper and lower balcony, Newton explained. The two lower sets of stairs, for whites only, had access to the lobby.

"The two upper sets of stairs had access only to the street," Newton said. "It's strange to think that, in the same way we think it's important to provide for the handicapped, they thought it was important to provide separate entrances for whites and blacks."

"Fountain Square has taken a strong stand against racial prejudice," said David Kelsey, an assistant professor of music. In 1983, when the Ku Klux Klan had a rally, he said, "we had a unity rally, and we invited all the black and white churches to come together and meet.

"If a black man is worthy of salvation, how can we say one (color) is better than the other?" Kelsey said. "In Christ there is no racial distinction."

There is irony in the theater's history, Newton said. "If the theater hadn't been designed for segregation, we wouldn't have been able to use the building for our church," he said.

"The two outer exits are providing the exits needed to fit the building code."

■

The doors to the two upper stairways are locked; a smooth coat of dust covers the steps. The lobby doors are the only main entrance now.

The pastor's study, around the corner and up another flight of stairs, is in the old projection room.

The upper balcony no longer has seats; it's been converted into classrooms. The lower balcony, which still has its theater seats, is also a classroom.

■

Now black and white fellowship together.

"Fountain Square practices what they preach," said Dr. Charles Baker, pastor of Trinity Free Will Baptist Church. "They practice true Christianity.

"It doesn't matter what color," he said. "They care about 'whosoever will' coming to Christ."

For nearly a year, Fountain Square has been loaning its old building to Trinity Baptist, a primarily black congregation, for Sunday morning services.

"We were a newly organized church, and we would've died out if they hadn't helped us," Baker said. "They're almost like our mother church."

Trinity Baptist, which began with 12 people, now has a regular attendance around 120.

The Free Methodist denomination first became involved in fighting racial prejudice in the 1700s with the abolitionist movement in Europe.

"It was a kind of move toward restoration of the Methodist-Episcopal Church," Newton said. "To be a Christian not only means to live a true and holy life, but to see that everyone in your community has a chance to do the same."

And at Fountain Square that means doing more than joining the fight against racial prejudice. Fountain Square breeds originality in its message, and has "become a sanctuary for creative people to bring their art, their music," Lane said.

A pastoral team of 15 people, Newton's pet project, watches out for those who are sick or need financial assistance. "Sometimes the pastor should get out of the way," he said.

Newton directs the group with monthly meetings.

Debbie Lane, a December graduate of Western, serves as a group pastor for Children's Active Religious Education, or CARE, which meets Sunday nights in the old building.

Seven CARE pastors, women between the ages of 21 and 28, work with children from age 4 to about 13.

"I've learned more from the children than I've taught," Debbie said. "It's like 'out of the mouths of babes . . .'"

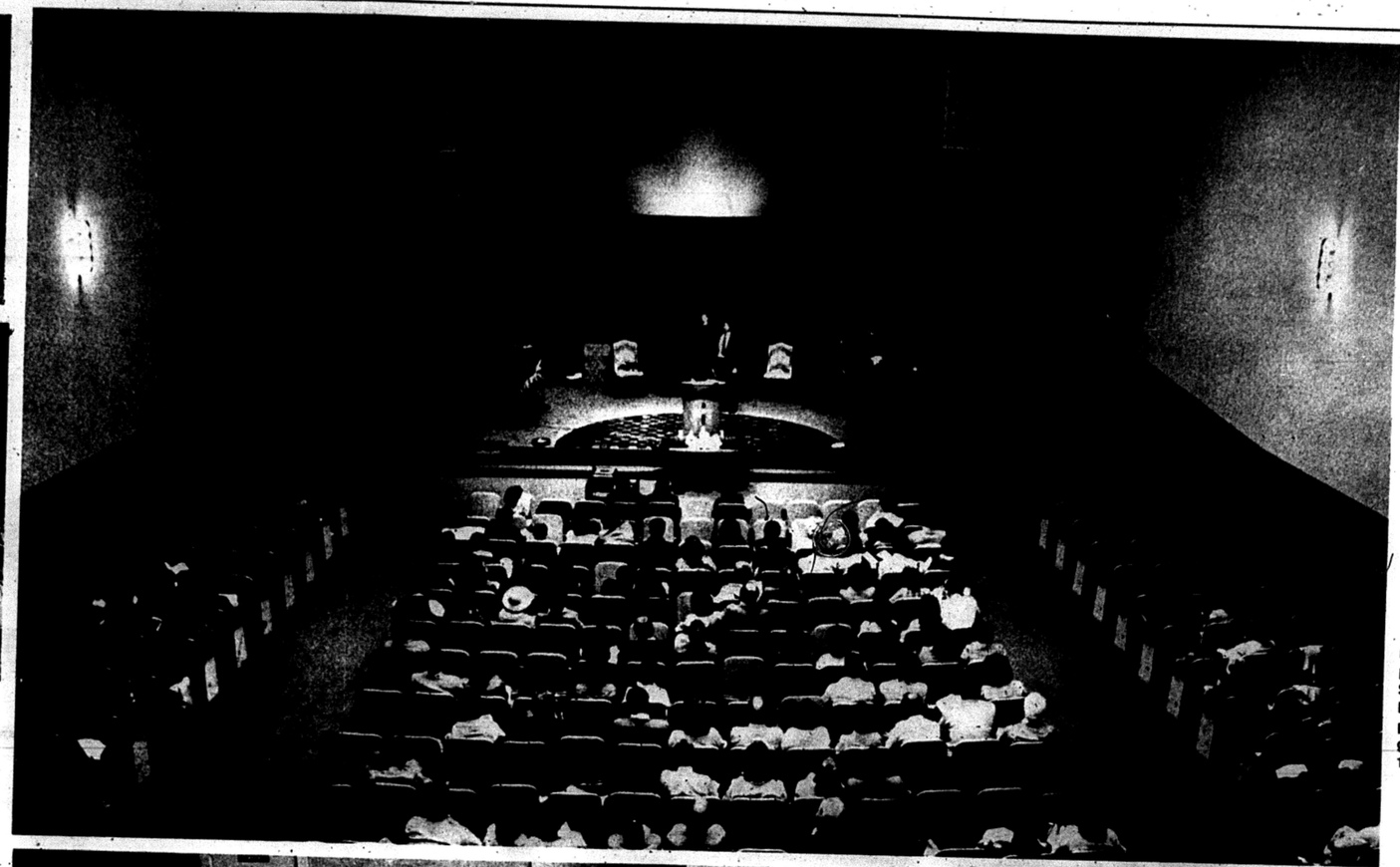
Steve Blazina, a Louisville senior, expresses his creativity through the music he writes. He performed one of his new songs for the church in March.

"Everyone has an opportunity to express themselves for God," Blazina said, "an equal opportunity.

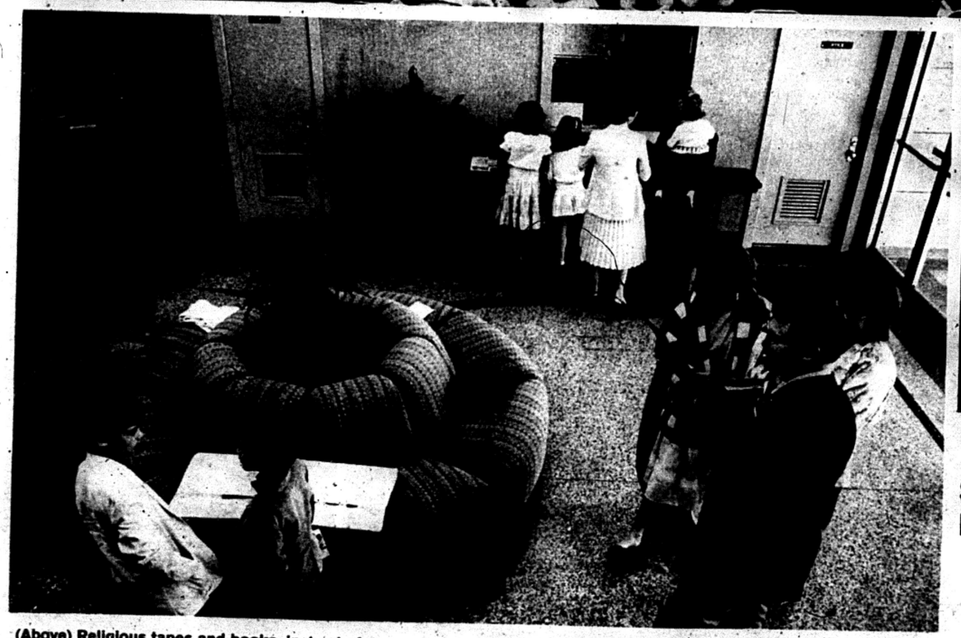
"They work to make college students feel at home where some other churches might intimidate them," he said. "They treat students equal with members who've been there a long time."

That's because much thought has gone into Fountain Square's ministry, Lane said.

"We want this to be a place where anyone can come to learn of Jesus Christ."



Doug Newton, pastor of Fountain Square Free Methodist Church, preaches to a congregation of about 125.



Fountain Square church is now the featured attraction of the old State Theater.

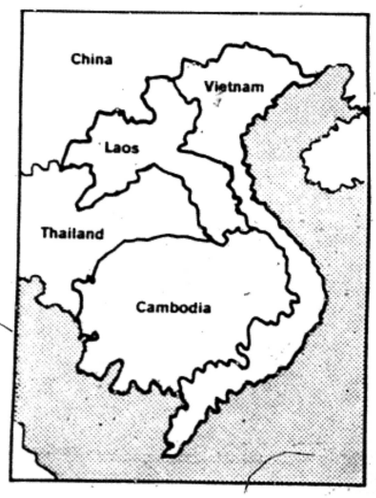
(Above) Religious tapes and books, instead of popcorn and candy, are available in the lobby of the renovated movie theater. (Left) Songs are projected onto the theater screen as Geoff Nelson leads the congregation in a hymn.

Story by Sheila Sullivan
Photos by Tim Broekema

LEARNING
ការសិក្សា ក្នុងការ
TO
សំរួល នៃការរស់នៅ
ADJUST

'We want to get out of hell. People write and say in America it is like heaven.'

— Seath Bun



continued from page 1

secution of their homeland to rebuild, forming the second largest pocket of immigrants in Kentucky.

They are a community within a community struggling to learn English, find jobs and adjust to a vastly different culture.

And in its schools and neighborhoods, Bowling Green is having to make allowances for them.

"So far I think I don't understand anything," said Bun, who has been president of the refugee council for the past year. "I find it very hard to understand."

He grins mischievously. "The American people feel the same way, I think."

Few Americans start with less than the Cambodians have, although for some of the refugees, Bun said, life in Cambodia was much like it is here.

But after the coup people were left with nothing. The settlers in Bowling Green, Bun said, are forced to "start from scratch."

Bun and his family, like nearly all of the Cambodians, spent several years in border camps in Thailand and the Philippines.

"In the camp we were really frustrated," said Bun, 35. He, his wife and four children lived in a small bamboo hut with a thatched roof — like those shown in movies about Africa, he said. "We don't have enough clothes to wear, not enough food to eat."

"We want to get out of hell," Bun said softly. "People write and say in America it is like heaven."

Marty Deputy, who heads the Western Kentucky Refugee Assistance Association, said the refugees "come with what they've picked up in the camps.

"That is really just nothing."

Once in the United States, the refugees can qualify for welfare for up to 18 months, Deputy said. The association also spends between $500 and $5,000 to settle a family, depending on their level of English, the number of people in the family and the severity of their emotional and physical scars.

It's not uncommon, she said, for refugees to arrive undernourished or with ulcers from anxiety. After the welfare assistance runs out, she said, they "are just like everybody else."

With one exception. They lack jobs and the basic English skills to get them.

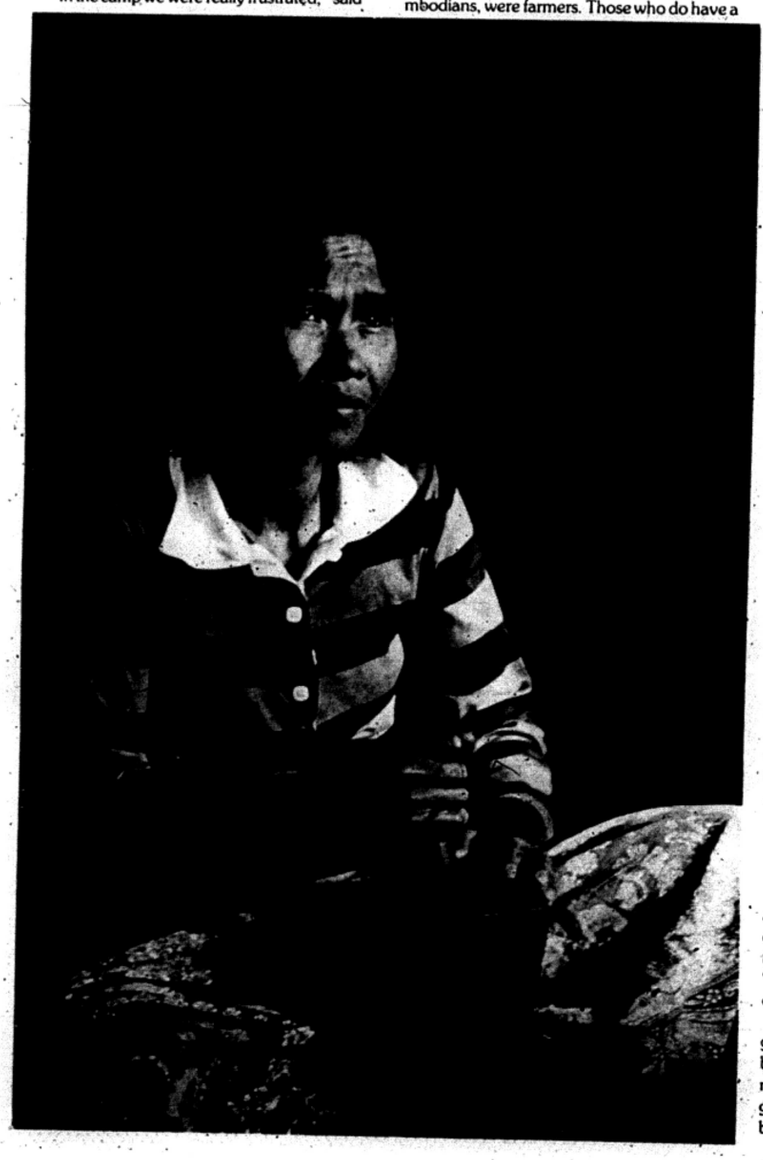
Deputy said finding work is difficult even for those who manage to speak "job English." She said most of the immigrants, especially the Cambodians, were farmers. Those who do have a marketable skill, such as driving a piece of equipment, are often pushed into low-skill jobs because of the language barrier.

Even then, she said, "it is hard to make McDonald's of some of those places believe that these people can really do the job."

"All those people need jobs," said Deputy, looking at a dozen names written in inch-high letters on a poster board in her office.

"That really bothers me."

"They are trying to work," said Bun, who learned English in high school in Cambodia. "They don't want to be dependent."



Grinding food for a Sunday evening meal, Saroeun Pich, sits inside her 11th Street apartment. She and her family have since moved into a bigger apartment.

Monn Pich, 31, was a gem miner in Cambodia. He said, in broken English, that it was a high-paying job. He now works at a chair factory to support his wife and four children.

The concrete walls of his four-room apartment are covered with two bright painted velvet rugs. A fading black and white photo of his youngest daughter is attached clumsily to the wall with strips of masking tape. In one of the bedrooms is a new stereo. In the living room is a color television with cable.

"I no like making chairs," Pich said, although he smiled about having a job. In Cambodia he worked without a supervisor, which he liked, but his house had no electricity or running water.

He doesn't want to return. His parents and his wife's were killed by the communists. He points out the favored methods of execution: shooting people in the head and cutting their hearts out.

What are his goals, or what does he want for his family in five years? He smiles and nods his head.

He doesn't understand.

According to the Immigration and Naturalization office in Louisville, about 12,500 Cambodians come into the United States each year from their kidney-shaped country on the Gulf of Siam. "There are more of them (Southeast Asians) far and away than any other group," said Dewey Wotring, officer in charge.

The first refugees to arrive in Bowling Green in the mid-70s were Vietnamese. Most, Deputy said, were sponsored by local churches. But as the original refugees found jobs, more and more sent home for family members, and the community began to grow.

The immigration of Cambodians accelerated after the Vietnamese invaded their country in 1979. Violence scourged the countryside. "They cannot control things," Bun said. A mass exodus began for the border. Some, like Bun's parents, stayed.

"I try to write a letter," he said in a near-whisper, his eyes haunted with sadness. "But they cannot write me back. They just disappear.

"They got a lot of land and a big house. They thought the next government would give it back," he said. "They were afraid they could not adjust to a new (American) system."

The adjustment has not been easy for anyone.

When the refugees first arrive they are in a state of shock that can last "from a couple of days to a month or longer," said Debbie Hall, a teacher at the refugee center, 548 E. Main. "Everything is so different. They are numb all over."

The obvious problems of learning a new language are even more acute for the refugees because many, especially the Cambodians, have never learned to read or write their own language. The children are particularly handicapped because many grew up under the Khmer

Rouge's severely restricted education.

"A lot of them," said Mary Ann Kearny, director of the association's English program, "have never been to school a day in their life."

"It is like being in jail," said Bun, who pauses thoughtfully before answering each question. "They can go anywhere, but they cannot talk. They are trying to learn, but it won't stick in their minds."

The communication problem is compounded by the vastly different language. Khmer, the Cambodian language, doesn't use the Roman alphabet. The Cambodians instead use Sanskrit, an ancient writing system that Kearny said "would look like squiggles" to Americans.

"It is very frustrating for some who thought they could come here and learn English in a few months," Hall said.

Instead, "it takes one and a half to three years to learn the speaking language," said Therese Suzuki, administrator of the English As a Second Language program in the local schools. "It takes five to seven years to compete academically."

The federal government has given the Warren County and Bowling Green school systems a grant of $306,000 over three years to help the 87 refugee children compete. Ninety-five percent of the children, Suzuki said, are Cambodian.

"As more and more of these children came in, it was very difficult to put them in a regular classroom and expect them to succeed," said Dr. Ronald Eckard, a professor of English who works with the English as a second language program at Western.

Despite some training in basic English in the camps, most refugees know only a few words. By age 12, the average American has a vocabulary of 135,000, Kearny said.

But Suzuki said the refugees have been supportive of the program, and Deputy said education is held in high regard.

"My children want to go to college so much," Bun said.

In the two years of the program, Suzuki said, there has only been one drop-out — a 24-year-old woman who quit school because she found a job.

Adjusting doesn't end with learning the language, Suzuki said. "You always teach language and culture together," she said. "You can't separate them."

Hall, who also has a degree in folk studies, said some refugees find it hard to adjust to American food and dress. The family unit in Cambodia is also more important, and children aren't encouraged to leave the nest in the same way that American children are. This, coupled with the idea that public displays of affection are improper, puts a strain on relationships between parents and children.

"I talk to a lot of parents that say it's kind of hard," said Bun, who has a 14-year-old daughter. The children "go to school and pick up American custom that they have a date with a boy."

But understanding foriegn cultures goes both ways. Just as the school system has had to make allowances for the foreign population, so have some neighborhoods — such as East 11th Street, where many refugee families stay until they can get on their feet.

(Above) Monn Pich and his daughter, Sary, share a meal of fish and rice at their home. He tries to spend time with four children when he gets off from his job in a factory. (Left) Several Cambodian children take advantage of the long driveway between their homes for a game of stick hockey. They were playing a late afternoon in March on 11th Street.

On a warm, clear day the refugees and their children are sitting on their front porches with a handful of friends and a pack of small children.

Long-time residents of the neighborhood say 11th Street was once a quiet place where the many retirees were "like one big family."

see page 8

'We know what happened over there was horrible, but they are going to have to adjust.'

— Sarah Cornwell

Deputy is 'Mom' to 390 refugees

Those walking through the door of the Western Kentucky Refugee Assistance Association are more than likely to be met by Marty Deputy and a request for a favor.

On top of the director's cluttered desk, an often-referred-to calendar lists the dentist, doctor and job appointments that must be met that day.

Out of this makeshift command station, Deputy helps organize the transport and training of some of the nearly 390 refugees living in Bowling Green.

Known as Mom to many of the Cambodian, Laotion and Vietnamese refugees, Deputy and a small platoon of volunteers put together a care package of friendship, information and support that helps the immigrants make the transition to life in America.

"We try to get them economically self-sufficient," Deputy said. "If they get into a job, they've got it made."

But mastering English, understanding the basics of American culture and healing the emotional and physical scars of years of living on the edge come first.

This year the organization received a $72,000 federal grant to help provide English classes, places to live, clothes and basic furniture.

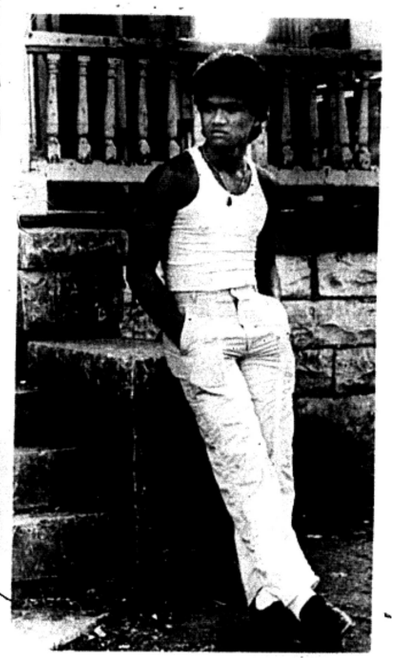
The future of that grant, along with much other federal aid, is shaky because of a recent round of funding cuts.

If the cuts are made, Deputy said, the already crowded English classes — the cornerstone of the program — would be the first casualty.

"A lot of professional people do a ton of little things," Deputy said, but "that regular volunteer is something we really haven't had much luck developing."

Student organizations could help, Deputy says, but even one volunteer teaching English one day a week could open one class. Volunteers could also help with transportation.

But the most important thing a volunteer could do, Deputy said, "is be a friend."



(Above) Seth Bun, former president of the refugee's council, sits in his Alvaton home with his wife and daughters. From left to right, Kitty, Cory, Chhorn and Carol. Not pictured is his oldest daughter, Patty. (Right) A sophomore at Bowling Green High School, Tom Oak, stands outside a house on 11th Street.

continued from page 7

Although they don't begrudge the refugees a place to live, they are uncomfortable with some of the customs, annoyed by the mischief of the children and worried about the effect the large refugee population could have on their property values.

They say they don't want to move, or can't afford to. "We have worked hard for what we've got," said Virginia Atkinson, who has lived on 11th Street since the late 1960s. She has been told that the Cambodians could lower her property value by $10,000 to $12,000, she said.

She and her neighbors complain about the number of Cambodians living in one house and the noise they create.

Sarah Cornwell, who also lives on 11th Street, said she has complained to the health department and the police about the refugees.

We don't object to them if they would keep from being so loud and stay out of the front yard," Cornwell said. "We know what happened over there was horrible, but they are going to have to adjust."

That, in part, is why the refugee association was founded and why the refugees from different countries pull together to make it work.

Bun said the association represents an effort by the refugees "to try to help these people get a job as soon as possible ... and help them fit into the culture."

The council represents all of the refugees in Bowling Green, including the Laotians and Vietnamese. Deputy said the council does much to smooth the transition. But because the representatives have several different native languages, the communication is sometimes rocky.

There is also a sensitivity among the refugees to being "lumped together" as South east Asians.

Not only do they come from different countries, they come with different goals and aspirations. Deputy says that many would like to to college if they could, and several attend Western.

Some of the more entrenched have successful careers. Some speak English with near perfection. Some barely understand job applications.

Bun, who works as a janitor at the Medical Center, says he has an advantage over many of the others because he has a command of English. He plans to take some classes at Western, "just to help understand."

Although he has never run into overt prejudice, some people try "to take a little bit advantage of us," he said. "They don't think we understand anything."

He says he is one of the lucky ones. With the help of a government loan, he owns a house in Alvaton. Although some still think of returning to Cambodia, most, like his family, don't want to go back.

The old and young, the American and traditional, mixed at a recent picnic for the Cambodian New Year.

Teen-age girls in tight blue jeans or flouncy print dresses giggled and laughed as they cast sidelong glances at the young men in shorts or parachute pants.

Older women wore traditional wrap-around skirts in brilliant, shimmering colors, or stylish American dresses of all varieties.

The slow, jazzy beat of Cambodian music echoed toward the streamers that festooned the ceiling in all-American red, white and blue.

Determined to adjust, the refugees are tackling the language and the culture. But they won't be drawn into the mainstream.

In the fall, Bun organized a Saturday school where the children were taught how to read and write Khmer.

"I don't want them to forget," he said. "It is very important."